



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 13 November 2024**

**Meeting Location:** Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

**Present:**

- Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
- Ms Diana Armstrong MLA
- Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Mr Philip McGuigan MLA
- Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**Present via Video-Conferencing:**

- Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

**In Attendance:**

- Roisin Kelly (Assembly Clerk)
- Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
- Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:01am.

**1. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's business.

**4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 6 November 2024

**5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

**6. Department for the Economy / Invest NI - 2024-27 Technology Sector Action Plans – oral and written evidence session**

The officials joined the meeting at 10:02am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Alan Ramsey, Director for International Trade and Investment, DfE;

- Jeremy Fitch - Executive Director for Business Growth, Invest NI.

Key issues discussed included: the pilot learning factory manufacturing school leaver training pathway; a capital grants scheme for food and drink manufacturers; support for skills; cyber post-graduate funding support and the need for other software skills development support; the linkage between regional balance, regional profiles, the development of the new cluster strategy and measures to support widening participation; support for green scale-able technology; the need for cross-cutting collaboration across the sectors; the importance of the creative industries; widening access, segmentation, growth partnership, regional resource and succession planning in respect of Invest NI's support for businesses; the impact of the Enhanced Investment Zone in respect of the net zero plan and the advanced manufacturing plan; and the growth potential of the sectors and progress updates on the sectoral action plans.

Jonathan Buckley recorded his concern that the location of FDI visits were an unrepresentative measure of Invest NI's support for the sub-regions of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:31am.

## **7. Disability Action – Employment Tribunals and Persons with disability – oral and written evidence session**

The witnesses joined the meeting at 11:32am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Nuala Toman, interim Head of Innovation and Impact, Disability Action;
- Les Allamby, Chairperson of the Litigant in Person Reference Group
- Catherine Edgar, former Litigant in Person.

The Chairperson declared an interest in that he had discussed the relevant issues previously with Disability Action.

Key issues discussed included: the absence of employment advocacy support for and the experience of, Litigants in Person (LiPs); the need for disability assessments for LiPs to be undertaken prior to tribunals in order to identify reasonable adjustments; the absence of a DfE employment tribunal reference group; the need for revised tribunal guidance co-designed with persons with disability; the need for an employment tribunal advocacy service to resolve issues prior to tribunal; the need for enhanced data on employment tribunal usage by persons with disability; the benefits of additional training for the judiciary including the application of the equal treatment bench book guidance to employment tribunals.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:27pm.

**Agreed:** Further to the previous evidence session, the Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity in respect of the development of renewable energy resources and related mapping exercises in NI. The Committee also agreed to seek clarity in respect of the ownership of the Northern Ireland coastal sea-bed and related developments in Scotland.

**Agreed:** Further to the previous evidence session, the Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking: further updates on the progress of the sectoral action plans; sight of the regional profiles which have informed the plans; and clarity on those actions which were reported to have commenced in 2024 as part of the software including cyber action Plan.

**Agreed:** Further to the previous evidence session, the Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update as to how the Skills Strategy will exploit existing structures in order to widen participation and inclusion.

**Agreed:** Further to the previous evidence session, the Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the agreement of the Enhanced Investment Zone and feedback from the Minister's recent related meeting with the UK Government.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Catherine Edgar and thank her for her evidence to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy to determine whether he intends to transfer the relevant employment tribunals to DoJ and regarding his plans to provide for a LiPs employment tribunal advocacy service.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the president of the employment tribunals in order to seek their commentary on the evidence presented to the Committee in respect of LiPs with disability and seeking clarity on current or planned mitigations.

## **8. Proposed Rule – SL1 - Public Interest Disclosure**

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule in respect of the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the proposed rule.

## **9. Correspondence**

### **9.1 Index**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

### **9.2 Social Enterprise Action Plan**

The Committee considered a copy of the Social Enterprise Action Plan

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite the Department to brief on the Social Enterprise Action Plan.

### **9.3 Tuition Fee Loan Support**

The Committee considered information from the Department on tuition fee loan support for the Graduate Entry Medicine School at Magee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating its support for the extension of tuition fee loans to courses designed to fill skills shortages and to seek clarity as to whether primary legislation is required for this change; and to determine if the Executive had agreed the related cross-cutting measures.

### **9.4 HE Funding**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in respect of the review of Higher Education funding. The review will start in early 2025 and report in 1 year and may have implications for the distribution of students across NI campuses.

### **9.5 DfE ARA**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence which advised that the publication of the Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2024 would be delayed until end November 2024.

### **9.6 Insolvency and Director Disqualification Legislation.**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the general consultation letter on the proposed amendments to insolvency and director disqualification legislation.

### **9.7 Support for Local Economic Partnerships**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental information confirming that it has put forward a 3 year bid for £15m pa support for Local Economic Partnerships.

### **9.8 DfE Weights and Measures Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Department's Weights and Measures Report for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2023.

### **9.9 Ministerial Statement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister on his statement to the Assembly on 11 November 2024 on a recent NSMC meeting.

### **9.10 Oral Statement by the Minister of Finance**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the oral statement by the Minister of Finance on the Chancellor's Statement.

### **9.11 Response on PfG from NISC**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response to the draft Programme for Government from the Northern Ireland Skills Council including a recommendation for a living wage for apprentices and a centralised skills agency to drive the skills agenda across the sectors.

### **9.12 Response on PfG from St. Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response on the draft Programme for Government (PfG) from young people in St. Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre, Belfast.

### **9.13 UCAS Data**

**Noted:** The Committee noted UCAS October early deadline data covering applications from NI students for 2025-26 HE courses in Oxford and Cambridge and for medicine, dentistry and veterinary science.

### **9.14 Invitation to Conferral Event**

The Committee considered an invitation to the Chairperson to a conferral event for Joe Kennedy III on Wednesday 13 November 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend the conferral event.

### **9.15 CMA Report on Infant Formula Pricing**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the interim CMA report on infant formula pricing and consumer information.

### **9.16 RHI**

**Noted:** The Committee noted further copies of correspondence from the Renewable Heat Association to NIAO and the Minister in respect of RHI.



## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the forward work programme.

## **11. Any Other Business**

Sinead McLaughlin recorded concerns in respect of the linkage between FDI focused visits in Belfast and the location of jobs.

Jonathan Buckley indicated that the Committee was in danger of losing sight of the importance of meeting the needs of FDI companies who wish to invest in NI.

## **12. Strategic Plan Update**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to defer consideration of its strategic plan.

## **13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 20 November 2024 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:39pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**20 November 2024**